

7 Ways for Students to Gain Work Experience

High schools students with and without disabilities alike can benefit from spending time at a variety of community businesses to find out about different types of work and jobs. The first step in the career exploration process is typically to complete one or more interest inventories. Without direct exposure and experience, however, students might not understand the choices they are making. Therefore, the goals and objectives students set are not always on target to help them find meaningful work that is a good fit for their individual skills and interests. Direct exposure to community businesses can be achieved in a variety of ways.

Try using a combination of the following options to better support career development for youth:

1. **Business Tours** – Based on student interests, teachers can set up tours at local businesses for one or more students. Students prepare questions ahead of time and then gather information directly from the person(s) who conduct the tour. After the tour, teachers meet with students to talk about what they saw, what they liked, and what job tasks they noticed being done. Business tours provide an excellent opportunity for students to see a range of work environments to help them consider what factors in a workplace will be important to them.



Business Tour at Vita Plus in Madison, WI

2. **Informational Interviews** – When a student has an expressed interest in working at a particular business or specific type of job, a teacher supports the student to schedule an interview with people who work in the place or field of interest. The student should prepare a set of questions to ask based on what she/he wants to know about that workplace and job duties.
3. **Job Shadows** – Once a student has more specific ideas about a job(s) she/he would like to try, that can be a good time for teachers to work with the student to identify possible places to go and watch jobs being done. A student should make a list of things they want to find out during a job shadow to make the most of the experience. Job shadows may take place where students toured and/or conducted informational interviews.
4. **Volunteer Work** – Volunteering can be a great way to gain direct work experience and build a resume. Some high schools offer service learning credit for the hours students spend volunteering. It is important that teachers follow labor laws when setting up and supporting volunteer opportunities. ***Students should not be volunteering their time on an ongoing basis to complete work that others in the same business or organization are paid to do.***

5. **Internships** – Businesses offer internships to help students learn about the work they do and get direct experience. Internships are time-limited and can range from a few weeks to a few months. High school students can seek internship opportunities with assistance from teachers and career counselors. In many areas, there are school-business partnerships called Partners in Education (PIE) through which internships are made available to students. School credit is sometimes available.

6. **Paid Temporary Work Experiences** – Students with disabilities may have the chance to work at a job for pay before the business officially hires them. This can be through an arrangement with the school district to pay the wages for a certain period of time or when a student applies and is found eligible for services through the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). Students with disabilities and their families typically apply for DVR services when they decide it is time to start looking for a paid job; however, DVR recommends that students apply **at least two years prior to graduation**. Once a student begins working with a DVR counselor, they will usually choose an employment or vocational support agency. Someone from that agency will assist the student, in conjunction with teacher and school staff, to look for a job. DVR can pay wages for a temporary work.

7. **Jobs** – Many high school students work part-time in the evenings, on weekends, and over the summer to make money, get work experience, and learn the soft skills needed for successful employment. Students and their families can apply for services through DVR to help with looking for a paid job and getting assistance with job training. DVR might consider using an option called Youth on the Job Training (YOJT) when an employer wants to hire a student with a disability, but an extended period of training might be needed. With YOJT, DVR reimburses an employer for the wages paid to a student while they are completing their job training and then the employer becomes fully responsible for the wages and benefits.

Paid employment for youth with disabilities while still in high school is the number one predictor of successful employment outcomes as an adult.

